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Eurovision: An Olympics of Popular Song



Lena prepares for her finals night performance in Düsseldorf on May 14, 2011. (© picture alliance / dpa) What if you had to choose a pop song to represent the USA and win the hearts and minds of people everywhere in an Olympics of song judged by the common folk? Who would represent the Stars and Stripes? Stevie...Aretha...Joni...Jimi? The Boss? The King?

Before you declare victory and start the chant of “USA...,” there are a couple ground rules to keep in mind. First, it has to be a song that has never been released, so the classics are out. Second, the song will compete in a no-holds-barred showbiz spectacle in which no gimmick – from tinfoil-clad drag queens to singing turkeys – has gone untried. Maybe it's time to dispense with pretensions of taste and refinement and see if Gallagher is available to collaborate with RuPaul?



The band Gipsy.cz of the Czech Republic pull out all the stops during dress rehearsal of the 2009 Eurovision Song Contest in Moscow, Russia. (© picture-alliance/dpa) This is the challenge that European countries face every year in the Eurovision Song Contest. Just holding your own in a musical tourney like Eurovision requires more than stage presence and a great tune. Winning Eurovision is a feat of chutzpah, international diplomacy and old-fashioned showbiz horse sense for which no country has cracked the code.

Five Decades of Song and Dance

Every Spring since 1956, European countries and an increasing number of neighbors have dispatched

performers to a different European capital to compete for the Eurovision title. The European Broadcasting Union, a confederation of mostly government-owned TV broadcasters that share content and develop technical standards, originally imagined the contest as a show of unity through diversity in a Europe that was still recovering from the wounds of war. A live broadcast across the continent was also considered a technical feat in the era before digital transmission and satellites.

Since then, the contest has expanded from a one-night TV show to a week-long tournament with 40 or so participating countries preceded by months of pre-season action covered in minute detail by the media.



Oscar Loya (center) of Germany's Alex Swings, Oscar Sings gets an assist from dancers and burlesque star Dita von Teese in Moscow in 2009. (© picture-alliance/ dpa) Although it attracts a worldwide audience in the hundreds of millions every year, few Americans have heard of Eurovision, and fewer still appreciate the brand of kitsch that dominates the contest. Even Eurovision veterans like the British (five-time winners), tend to hold the contest in low-esteem as a corny circus surrounding lowest-common-denominator pop, perhaps due to their own success in exporting pop music.

The Middle of the Road, a Path to Glory?

The critics have a valid point, but the lowest-common-denominator is a good bet when trying to get votes in dozens of nations, so the schmaltzy pop and disco is usually accompanied by reliably crowd-pleasing stunts, saucy choreography and plenty of skin.



Nicole won Eurovision for Germany in 1982 with the song "Ein Bißchen Frieden" ("A Little Peace"). (© picture alliance / dpa) In 2009, Germany's swing duo "Alex Swings, Oscar Sings" performed Miss Kiss Kiss Bang Bang while burlesque star Dita von Teese did a strip tease. In most respects, this was a reprise of Germany's effort in 2007, in which crooner Roger Cicero sang another ditty about women who get their way using sex. The lesson learned from Cicero's 19th-place finish seems to be that a lukewarm reception can usually be attributed to a lack of bare flesh on stage.

The racy turn that things have taken in Eurovision is nothing extraordinary when compared to the general escalation of glitz and sex in pop music, however. In the more innocent 1980's, Germany's biggest Eurovision success to date came with a wholesome country ballad sung by the flaxen-haired Nicole. The drift toward the risqué shows that Eurovision has always remained firmly planted in the middle of the pop road, wherever it may lead.

The middle of the road is not the only path to success in Eurovision, however. A truly classic tune can prevail; ABBA won for Sweden with Waterloo in 1974. Musical chops also occasionally count for something, as Celine Dione proved when she took home the prize for Switzerland in 1988.



Their Eurovision win was the beginning of ABBA's international breakthrough. (© picture-alliance/ dpa) Sheer novelty also plays a role, but it can cut both ways. The Finnish heavy metal band Lordi certainly broke new ground in 2006 when they took the stage in elaborate Tolkien-inspired monster costumes and gobbled up the most votes ever with Hard Rock Hallelujah. On the other hand, Ireland's 2008 entrant, a singing turkey puppet named Dustin, failed to earn any votes at all, despite the fact that singing poultry was a Eurovision first. Irony generally falls flat in Eurovision, which favors the outrageous and the new, but only when it is done with true conviction.

Politics in Hotpants?

Perhaps the biggest factor that influences the outcome is politics. Georgia submitted a song that was perceived as critical of Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin for the 2009 contest in Moscow. After Russian protests, the organizers disqualified the song for its political content, but not before Georgia had made its point.



Elaborate costumes, like those of Lordi in 2006, are by now par for the course at Eurovision. (© picture-alliance/ dpa) Some observers also bemoan a phenomenon called bloc voting, in which regional affinities and animosities play out in the tournament. Scandinavian nations often vote together, and Eastern Europe tends to withhold votes from Western Europe. In 2009, Eurovision reintroduced juries to the complicated voting system. The inclusion of experts is intended to counterbalance the passions of the televoting populace with critical judgment.

Despite such reforms, Eurovision does not make much claim to be a meritocracy. For starters, the four biggest financial contributors, Germany, Spain, the UK, and France, get an automatic spot in the finals. The voting system is also designed to keep things interesting. After the performances, each country ranks

the contestants, who earn a certain number of points from each country depending on their ranking. No country can vote for its own song. Since the votes are tabulated by country, Eurovision results are often perceived as an indicator of relations between nations in Europe.

How European is Eurovision?

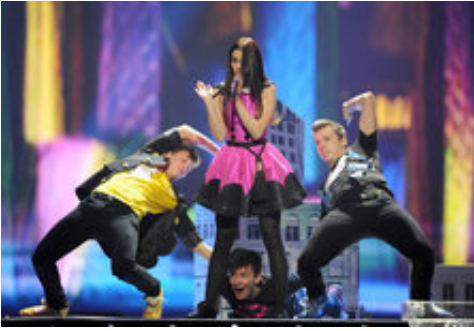


The sisters Inga and Anush of Armenia perform in fantastical costumes during dress rehearsal of the 2009 Eurovision Song Contest in Moscow. (© picture-alliance/dpa) While the original concept was to showcase national cultures, English has come to dominate the contest, and there are no restrictions on the nationality of the songwriters and performers. In 2008, the Russian Singer Dima Belan won handily with an English-language ballad produced by American hitmaker Timbaland.

That is not to say that national identity does not play out in the songs and stage shows. English songs will often contain a phrase or verse in the national language, and a sprinkling of national flavor is de rigueur. After all, Greek Disco and Turkish disco sound pretty much alike, except for the fact that Greek disco features a bouzouki solo, while Turkish disco has a dumbek breakdown. Flags, snugly tailored national costumes and regional dances also put a national stamp on most performances, but the focus remains on the international language of pop.

Even at Eurovision, however, sincerity and authenticity sometimes trump politics and showbiz antics. In 2007, Serbian singer Marija Serifovic won with a tastefully understated performance of the Serbian-language power-ballad Molitva, which captured top-rankings not only from Switzerland, Austria, and Finland, but also all of the nations of the former Yugoslavia. It seems that music, even in the gladiator's arena, really can help heal the wounds of war.

Eurovision



GERMANY'S "MISS MIRACLE" IS BACK ON EUROPE'S STAGE



The countdown has begun for the world's biggest music show, and the performance of defending champion Lena of Germany. On May 14, Düsseldorf will stage the finals of the 56th Eurovision Song Contest.

Eurovision 2011

LENA MEYER-LANDRUT - "TAKEN BY A STRANGER" (OFFICIAL MUSIC VIDEO)

(© BACS)

Lena is representing Germany with her song "Taken by a Stranger" in the Eurovision Song Contest 2011 in Düsseldorf, Germany.

www.eurovision.de
